



Facer, K. (2017). The return of the real: youth, ethnography and social change. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(3), 415-422.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1281645>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1080/01425692.2017.1281645](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1281645)

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## **The return of the real: youth, ethnography and social change**

**A review of 'The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age' by  
Sonia Livingstone & Julian-Sefton Green**

This fascinating, readable and important book opens on 'a sunny afternoon in July' in a London classroom and introduces us to the students who make up the eponymous 'Class'. Affectionately written with a useful chink of ice in the heart, the opening introduces us to the children: the one who 'seems to have struggled out of bed', the girls who seem like 'firm friends', the 'giant of a child', the one who answers 'dazed' to the questions.

From the outset this book achieves Geertz's definition of what is required for us to take ethnography seriously, namely, the *'ability to convince us that what they say is a result of their actually having penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly 'been there'.* And that, *persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in* (Geertz, 1988, pp4-5)

Following a class of 28 13-14 year olds in an 'ordinary urban secondary school in west London' between 2011-2012, the writing 'comes in' very strongly in this book. It offers a richly textured account of children's contemporary lives at home, in their classrooms, in their friendship groups and the in-between spaces that they defend from both teachers and parents. In so doing, the book makes the most of what its authors call the 'researchers privilege', namely, the privilege of following and understanding the child in school and at home, with friends and online in order to *'unpack the first impressions on which much of social life is based, to reveal the deeper patterns, influences and relationships'* (3).

The critical value of this researchers' privilege is to help the authors *'get beyond the fearful claims circulating among adults about today's youth'*. These fearful claims, as indicated in the book's subtitle 'living and learning in the digital age', are often crystallised around young people's encounters with digital technology. And indeed, this book can and should be read in the context of the now thirty-year debate about implications of children's interactions with digital technologies.

In this respect is important to note that the book is clearly addressing a set of conversations about children and the digital age that have, since the mid 2000s, been dominated by American scholars, some of whom have been supported by the Macarthur foundation (who also funded this project and the very welcome free online availability of this book). These scholars have made significant progress over the last decade in countering the knee jerk generational anxieties about youth and new technologies. From a European perspective, however, this research can seem heavily US-centric and, at times, overly enamoured of individual narratives of highly connected, active youth who thrive in online environments. This book takes a more nuanced, profoundly grounded approach, seeking to get beyond the sometimes excitable claims about the potential of digital technologies to create a new 'connected' form of youth. Instead, the careful longitudinal ethnography enables the authors to explore the interweaving of digital lives with factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and locale. Indeed, laced throughout the book is a concern with social justice – with exploring how different families, with different resources, are making sense of and navigating these changing times.

But to understand this book simply as a contribution to the literature on youth and technology is misleading, rather, its aims are the significantly more ambitious, namely, the

authors are concerned with understanding lives lived within '*globalised, individualised and consumerist society*' (p5). While it may not achieve quite this lofty ambition (there is very little in the book, for example, on children's consumption practices or shopping cultures), it goes a long way to exploring how teenagers' identities are developing at '*a particularly interesting point in late modernity in which the contrary forces of sociotechnological innovation and reproduction of traditional structures (the school, family, social class) threaten to pull young people in different directions*' (11).

Indeed, the book speaks to and challenges, through detailed ethnographic analysis, the wider literature on reflexivity, identity and modernity. It takes on, at various points, both standard accounts of contemporary reproduction theory and the deracinated analyses typical of accounts of the 'networked society'. It is an important book, therefore, not only for scholars of youth and sociotechnical change but for any serious analysis of contemporary society.

The book's two opening chapters comprise a useful examination – through theory and empirical data - of the key forces with which young people are contending as they are growing up today. Chapter 1 critically engages with the familiar claims that contemporary society is best understood as an increasingly individualised risk society. Against the uncritical acceptance of this account, they outline the empirical data that demonstrates the continued collective and stratified nature of young people's opportunities and resources in this context. This interplay frames their subsequent analysis – seeking to explore both the forces of individualisation and the role of gender, social class, ethnicity, family and community in providing resources for individual life trajectories. They are concerned in particular, however, with young people, and as such, this framing chapter also comprises a discussion of the recent major debates in contemporary youth studies – from the changing nature of the educational institution to longstanding question of youth identity as both 'being' and 'becoming'.

This analysis provides a context for their subsequent overview, in Chapter 2, of a year of fieldwork, in which they begin to show how individual lives and larger social changes are intertwined. As a masterclass in sensitive, careful explanation of ethnographic methodology in education, this chapter is worth reading alone for any students of education. The chapter concludes with a set of orienting questions that guide the following empirical analyses '*what, if anything, is distinctive about the texture of young people's lives today, and what identities are they forming? What does being educated mean for young people, their families, and their teachers in an individualised risk society? And what are the demands, resources and institutional practices that facilitate or constrain young people's agency as they seek to determine their future trajectory and life changes?*' (60)

These questions are explored in Chapters 3 and 4, through an examination of children's 'networks and social worlds', looking at how young people talk about who and what is important to them, how they organise their time and with whom. For anyone who has ever been in a school this chapter is compelling, describing as it does the different cliques, sub groups and networks that form social relationships and friendships, and demonstrating the work that it takes to participate in so-called 'core groups'. Importantly, these chapters explore how this identity work is woven together across online and offline spaces, and the critical ongoing importance of the face to face and the physical in framing and creating friendships amongst this group. As they argue '*much of the worry about young people being absorbed in social networks is wide of the mark*' (104) and '*digital networks underpin face to face networks rather than creating alternative connections and modes of identity*' (104). In

this way, the study reinforces and updates the findings we have seen for the last two decades in digital sociology and anthropology (e.g Woolgar, 2002), although it is too much to hope that such sustained and longitudinal evidence will do much to calm the excitable interests of headline writers.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on children's lives in school and the way that contemporary educational institutions are being confronted with new challenges as they operate in conditions of superdiversity and digital connectivity. These two chapters do a very important job of achieving the authors' aim to portray *'the texture and quality of everyday school experiences'* (107), exploring the identity offered to the young people as learners in the school and how this is (or is not) taken up. In particular it offers a fascinating account of how the idea of comprehensive education is today being realised in practice in the context of highly diverse student groups. Central to this, the authors argue, is the school's creation of a culture of 'civility' (after Norbert Elias) that is premised on a discourse of equal opportunity and fairness that is broadly subscribed to by all students and that is actively promoted by teachers. This cultural practice, they argue, may provide the only foundation for teaching in conditions of superdiversity. Importantly, however, they demonstrate how this discourse in reality leads to the familiar erasure of issues of race and a privileging of those discourses most familiar to white middle class children. The creation of a culture of civility, moreover, potentially sets up an oppositional relationship between school and home.

And it is the family and the ways in which parents are attempting to create conditions for learning and for 'modern democratic family life' in the home that are the subjects of the next two chapters. These offer, in some cases, highly moving accounts of individual families' struggles to provide supportive environments for their children, of children's own attempts to create liveable worlds for themselves, and the limits of conceptual, social and economic resources that they may have to achieve this. The realities of class, gender, ethnicity as structuring factors in shaping young people's identities and resources are clearly delineated through both chapters.

At the same time, we are offered rich and sometimes comic accounts of the complex negotiations within families around space and time, around the tensions of living together and creating space for autonomy. The affectionate and ethical style of writing that characterises the whole book is strongly in evidence here as the authors seek actively to understand both parents' and children's rationales and choices. Importantly, prevailing anxieties about digital technologies as causing social isolation, most commonly captured in Turkle's argument that families are increasingly 'alone together', are rendered more nuanced by the accounts of these families' strategies. As the authors argue

*'living together, then, remains the bedrock of family life, but recognition of the individualisation of modern lives, including the rights of children to explore their own interests and the complexities faced by parents with their own pressures and desires, demands a degree of separation within the home [...] the result is an often-mediated but still-genuine togetherness that sustains the fragile balance between individuality and commonality required in the modern 'democratic' family' (166/7)*

More than this, the authors show how the process of disconnection can sometimes be important in the creation of autonomous spaces to develop different and playful identities, to protect personal lives from encroachment by schooled activities and so forth. Indeed, they show how disconnection can be an intentional and positive activity for young people:

*‘where adult boundaries are imposed unwillingly on young people, they welcome the potential of digital networks to reconnect them. But where adults themselves initiate connections, young people seem more likely to evade than subscribe to them whether they are digital or not’ (237). As a consequence the authors encourage us not to see disconnection as negative, but as a positive choice about ‘the value of separation – as facilitating spheres of autonomy or trusted spaces rather than as failing to take up the promise of connection’ (252).*

Chapters 9 in contrast, moves beyond the located analyses of the previous chapters to explore children as dynamic in space and time, tracing the interconnected (or not) experiences of learning music across multiple settings. It offers rare and detailed insights into the pedagogies of learning outside the school setting, tracing different children’s experiences of music learning. Through this seemingly simple device, the authors provide a useful elaboration of the concept of cultural capital. They distinguish between what they call ‘traditional cultural capital’ – oriented towards the cultivation of ‘conventional’, elite forms of knowledge and practice, often extrinsically motivated and teacher-directed and recognised through certification and recognised by schools; ‘bohemian cultural capital’ – oriented toward self-development and expression, characterised by person-centred and dialogic pedagogies, resistant to formalisation but nonetheless comprehensible within the school; ‘nonconvertible cultural capital’ – oriented toward the development of cultural capacities that have high status within communities outside the school, that are characterised by different forms of pedagogy – sometimes teacher led, collective, practice based, others highly individualised – but which are invisible to and ‘nonconvertible’ into the metrics of the school. Here, the chapters describe the different learning experiences, for example, of Sedat, a young man from the Turkish community whose experiences playing the saz brought him into contact with internationally recognised teachers, gave him a high level of social respect, but whose talents and work in this field would not be acknowledged or known by the school.

Critically, this chapter demonstrates the point they make later in the conclusion, which is that informal learning – whether of music or of digital making – is no less supported by cultures and structures, than formal learning. This analysis leads productively to a wider critique of the breathless narratives of individualised choice and self-motivated learning that swirl around many a conference promoting the potential future trajectories for youth in the digital age:

*Engagement in creative digital media activities [...] seemed particularly short-lived, even if it was enjoyed in the moment. This points to the need for social and institutional support for informal learning activities, which was often most readily available among families whose lives were already embedded in a rich cultural world [...] It was seemingly least recognised by the more individualised families – wealthy or poor - who lacked such a local culture and who tacitly accepted the notion that success is a matter of individual striving and character. In sum, the choice biography is problematic, inasmuch as it imposes a responsibility for managing it well (thereby generating anxiety for the young, their teachers, and their parents). (246)*

Chapter 10 and the Conclusion of the book both suffer from the same productive weaknesses, they are simply replete with a huge range of rich observations and analyses, all of which would benefit from more elaboration and space. Chapter 10, while providing a useful overview of concepts of life trajectory, identity and cultural capital is relatively limited empirically; it is as though the authors did not have the language for thinking about how

students' ideas of the future might be distinguished or framed before the fieldwork was conducted. After all, just as the study distinguishes the different sorts of language that families and schools mobilise for both learning and for cultural capital, so it would have been helpful to explore in more detail the different ideas of the future, and different orientations to the future on offer in schools. Indeed, it strikes me that there is a productive dialogue that might be developed between the analysis in this book and Margaret Archer's ideas of reflexive identity; not least, because the experiences of these young people might provide pointers as to how the older students that Archer works with, have developed their different modes of 'communicative, autonomous, spontaneous or fractured' reflexivity (Archer, 2010)

Despite this (very small) weakness, the closing two chapters of the book as a whole read like a manifesto for further research and inquiry – in a good way. They simply proliferate nuggets of interesting observations that beg further exploration. Indeed, the book as a whole is far richer and more nuanced in its analyses than it is possible to convey here. There are, however, a couple of clear, repeated and important insights that surface repeatedly throughout the book and that it is worth restating here.

First, that rather than becoming over-anxious about children's online activities (which are broadly being managed carefully by both children and parents) contemporary anxieties would be better focused on the way the digital has been incorporated into the language of learning in the school. Indeed, the authors succeed in showing how strange the school has become as a site in which learning is understood and framed only through the language of levels and metrics of progress, in which each day children will have 2-10 instances of behaviour and attainment recorded in the school management system and reflected back to them, in which teachers and parents will discuss not the content of learning activities but the disembodied progress of the child against a set of indicators determined nationally, and in which the group identity of a class is produced by public discussion of individual behaviour captured in these databases. As I have argued elsewhere (Facer, 2012) and as this book emphasises, it is in the SIMS system and the database that the digital has profoundly infiltrated and altered these young people's lives in school, to the point that they, their teachers and their parents are appropriating this language of individualised, externally motivated and highly standardised progress as the meaning of learning. As Livingstone & Sefton-Green argue: *'the idea of learning held out by teachers to students is... one that prioritises regulation of progression above other qualities such as intrinsic interest and engagement'* (144). What is clear, moreover, is that this reframing of learning intensifies the longstanding incomprehension between home and school cultures to the point that even high levels of cultural and social achievement cannot be recognised within the school culture if it is not translatable into the language of levels.

Second, and more importantly, the authors build on this observation with an analysis of why there is, contrary to the broad tradition of school ethnographies, little or no resistance discernible to this framing of education. They argue that in conditions of increased competition and concerns about employability, both children and parents have broadly accepted the bargain that schools will deliver results in return for behaviour that fits their required culture of civility. They note that there is limited class based resistance, even when the language of equality of opportunity is demonstrably unsustainable. Instead:

*'Differences in opportunity or achievement were not seen as either controversial or unfair – quite the contrary. Thus, it seems that a sense of collective classed identity is giving way to an uncertain and ambivalent recognition of status differentials, understood as a matter of individual talent or luck, good or bad. The long-term outcome – that social advantage or*

*disadvantage persists – is little changed from 20 years ago, but the means by which it comes about and the implications for identity and social relations are reconfigured’ (244)*

These, rather than the longstanding and long-disproven anxiety that the digital is replacing the physical, or the overhyped attention to exceptional cases of online creativity, are the issues that Livingstone and Sefton-Green encourage readers to pay attention to. This is important.

All in all this is a useful, practical and powerful study that clearly demonstrates the value of detailed ethnographic research to ground and test theoretically derived accounts of contemporary life. It leaves the reader wanting and wondering in the best sense – if this is what is happening in West London, how are these forces playing out in the interwoven digital, physical, family and school lives of young people elsewhere – from Mexico City to Bangalore? Hopefully this is the beginning of a much wider movement to radically proliferate and diversify the accounts we have available of how young people are growing up in the digital age and what that means for identity and social relations.

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